

ASSESSING FAMILY PRACTICES IN PURCHASING HOME FURNISHINGS

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The study of family buying practices has been an area of concern to housing and home furnishings specialists for a number of years and for a good cause. Evidence from past research shows that financial matters constitute the most frequent source of disagreement for husbands and wives (Goode, 1965; Bossard and Boll, 1955). There are several factors unique to this area of adjustment which cause the difficulty (Blood, 1970). First of all, the financial state of a family does not stabilize easily, because both the amount of income and the demands on that income constantly fluctuate according to changes prompted by moving through the life cycle, such as the presence or absence of children. Another characteristic of money problems is that when mistakes are made, there is usually something tangible present to serve as a

constant reminder of a poor choice. A third factor which causes difficulty is that frequently the person who makes the money does not make the purchases, thus creating a further tendency to place the blame on someone else if mistakes are made.

The purchase of home furnishings becomes an issue with many couples shortly after they marry and continues throughout their married life. It is the concern of these researchers to learn to recognize potential areas of difficulty in buying furnishings in an effort to help families derive ultimate satisfaction from their consumer choices.

Much of the previous evidence regarding consumer practices in purchasing home furnishings has focused on individual preferences of color and style or how money allocated for furnishings is spent. At the present time, however, little has been discovered about how these preferences are influenced by other factors, such as purchases previously made or the amount of money available for purchases at a given time (Charlton, 1965). No information is available on the interpersonal dynamics associated with consumer decision making and family goal achievement.

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Since women traditionally have been associated with the management of the home along with its maintenance and upkeep, they have also been responsible for making many of the purchases of household goods. In the past, it was reasonable to assume that because women buy more of the home furnishings items they must be more knowledgeable about such purchases than are their spouses.

Recent trends altering role relationships among husbands and wives of the middle class would lead one to expect a greater degree of joint decision making in some problem areas (Ferber and Lee, 1974). More emphasis by educators on the competency of probable decision makers might be appropriate. It is the purpose of this research to determine whether wives actually are more knowledgeable about home furnishings products than are their husbands.

It is recognized that young families have a tendency to spend more of their income on items in the home furnishings category than do families that have been established longer (Oppenheim, 1965). Some of these are newlywed couples who are making their initial purchases to furnish their houses or apartments. If it is true that a greater degree of joint decision making can be anticipated in making purchases and that the purchase of home furnishings items will constitute a fairly large proportion of the income of young families, then we can expect that to maximize the satisfaction level of both spouses there needs to be a reasonably good consensus on what each person wants to buy. There is no empirical evidence to suggest whether husbands and wives have a higher degree of similarity in their preference for certain designs of home furnishings items than does the public at large. It would seem that over time couples might hold more preferences in common as they have opportunity to negotiate and make compromises on actual purchases for their homes. Initially, however, as young families bargain with each other and make their choices it is important that the individuals know if they are perceiving the preferences of the other correctly

and to what degree they hold preferences in common.

HYPOTHESES

Based on the foregoing rationale, the following hypotheses were generated for study:

- I. Wives are more knowledgeable than husbands about the function and design of home furnishings.
- II. Husbands and wives hold furniture preferences in common to a greater extent than do randomly paired couples.
- III. Accuracy of spousal predictions of husband-wife furniture preferences increases with length of time married.
- IV. Husbands and wives are equally perceptive in their spouses' home furnishings preferences.

METHODS

The research design specified that a series of married couples be tested utilizing a paper-and-pencil technique in which they responded individually to a set of slides prepared for their viewing. In order to accommodate the schedules of the participants, several testing periods were established in which no more than two couples were tested simultaneously. By having no more than four people at a time in the testing room, it is assumed that confusion over instructions was kept at a minimum and opportunities for husband-wife collaboration on individual items were decreased.

Development of the Instrument

An introductory questionnaire was presented to the respondents in the initial part of the testing period for the purpose of compiling demographic data pertinent to the study. The testing device consisted of a total of forty-four slides depicting various home furnishing products. More than three hundred slides of furnishings were taken in

stores, homes, and offices by a graduate research assistant who was proficient in photography. The group of slides was first sorted to eliminate poor quality and confusing factors, such as bad angles and background conflict. They were then categorized according to function or types of furniture. A random selection of slides from each category was made to assure controlled variety for the preference items.

The final instrument was composed of three sections. The first two sections utilized the same set of thirty slides assembled for variety to evaluate individual preferences of home furnishings items. The slides were flashed on the screen at ten-second intervals, and in the initial showing, each spouse was instructed to mark the answer sheet according to how well they personally liked the particular piece of furniture in question. A five-point scale ranging from "like not at all" to "like very much" was utilized as the response categories. At the end of this procedure, the participants were told they were next to mark their answer sheets according to how well they thought their spouse would like each furniture piece depicted in the slides. The same set of thirty slides was then repeated to test the perceptual accuracy of spousal preferences.

The third section of the instrument consisted of fourteen slides of various furnishings designed to test the participants' general knowledge of design, function, and style. A multiple-choice question accompanied each slide directing the respondent to evaluate a particular dimension of the item. In addition, six questions were included to test the respondents' knowledge about fabrics in which actual swatches of fabric were presented for investigation.

Scoring was established on the personal preference section of the test by adding the points on each of the thirty items indicating the degree to which the individuals like a given piece of furniture. Possible scores ranged from 30 to 150 points. The spousal perception of preferences section was scored by determining the discrepancy on each item between what the individual marked

as actual preference and what the spouse marked as perceived preference. Low discrepancy of responses represented high accuracy of perception. The third section was scored according to the number of correct responses on each of the multiple-choice questions testing knowledge of design, function, style, and fabric.

The Sample

The sample was obtained by enlisting the participation of women students enrolled in home economics classes during the spring and summer quarters of 1974. Only those married students were selected in the sample.

The final group of participants consisted of twenty-two married couples. The husbands ranged in age from 21 to 47 years with a mean age of 25.6 years. The wives' ages ranged from 19 to 43 with a mean of 23.8 years. Most of the couples (15-22) had no children, four couples had one child each, two had two children, and one family had six. In terms of years married, the range extended from 1 to 22 years with a mean of 4.2. With regard to patterns of residence patterns, sixteen couples occupied single family homes, five families were apartment dwellers, and one couple listed a military base as their home.

RESULTS

Hypothesis I—*Wives are more knowledgeable than husbands about the function and design of home furnishings.* The anticipated difference between husbands and wives in this hypothesis was postulated as a result of reports of family purchasing practices which indicate that wives are most apt to be involved in buying items for the home. When a one-tailed t-test was employed to test the difference between mean knowledge scores of husbands and wives, however, no significant difference appeared. Mean values on the knowledge section of the instrument were 15.45 for males and 15.86 for females respectively. The t value was $-.60$ ($p = .55$).

Hypothesis II—*Husbands and wives hold furniture preferences in common to a greater extent than do randomly paired couples.* Fifty randomly paired couples were created by selecting five husbands and five different wives and matching their perception scored with those of five randomly chosen members of the opposite sex, not including their spouses. This resulted in two groups, one of random males paired with a set of designated females and second of random females paired with specified males. The mean perception scores of these randomly paired groups were compared with the mean score of the married couples in the sample utilizing an analysis of variance technique. A statistically significant difference emerged from an F value of 7.30 ($p < .01$). It should be noted that low discrepancy scores designate high accuracy of perception. The mean score for the married couples in this analysis was 71.91. Randomly selected males paired with females had a mean score of 102.36, and randomly selected females paired with males scored 95.60.

Hypothesis III—*Accuracy of spousal predictions of husband-wife furniture preferences increases with length of time married.* It was expected that as couples were married longer their aesthetic taste for particular styles of furnishings would become more alike. This hypothesis was rejected. The Pearson correlation coefficient was virtually zero for the sample when the relationship between degree to which husbands and wives agreed on preferences of specific home furnishings items and length of time married was analyzed.

Hypothesis IV—*Husbands and wives are equally perceptive of their spouse's home furnishings preferences.* No significant difference was found between husbands' and wives' ability to perceive the home furnishings preferences of their spouses. Mean perception scores were compared by use of the t-test with a separate variance estimate. Mean perception scores which were actually indicative of degree of discrepancy from spousal scores were as follows:

	\bar{X}	SD
MALES	75.82	38.39
FEMALES	68.25	23.24

The t value was .79 ($p = .43$). Thus, although wives were found to be somewhat more perceptive of their husbands' preferences than vice versa, the difference was not significant.

DISCUSSION

It has been assumed for many years that women, as keepers of hearth and home, are somehow innately designated to perform and excel in homemaking related activities. They are the individuals who are appealed to through the mass media to buy certain household products because of the major role women play as consumers in the marketplace. Men have been described as performing only instrumental roles in the family, serving as breadwinners and acting as liaison persons to the outside world. The results of this study suggest that these assumptions are not now true. An assertion from a husband that he does not know anything about the style or quality of home furnishings, if such as argument is still used, may be merely an excuse to avoid an inconvenience to himself of becoming involved in the decision-making process for that particular purchase.

Although we did not explore in this research how well each couple *enjoyed* making home furnishings purchases, we did discover that, at least in our sample, husbands and wives are equally capable of judging quality of large household items as measured by our testing device. It may be that, with a greater degree of role interchange of married couples stemming from a breakdown of traditional typologies, one's knowledge base by necessity must be expanded. This would account for the distribution and internalization of information on a nonsex-related basis. Women now are freer to explore interests which they have outside of the expressive dimension traditionally

associated with females. Males, also, have more freedom to discover more creative means of expressing themselves.

If the above conclusions are true, in the future we may expect that both men and women will be viewed as potential consumers, and changes in role relationships will penetrate into the market place, challenging stereotypes associated with women as primary decision makers in furnishing the home. Men and women alike may share in a sense of pride realized through the achievement of an aesthetically satisfying environment.

Perception of Spousal Preferences

The findings from the testing of Hypotheses II and III appear to be somewhat interrelated with regard to the implications which they suggest. The results of Hypothesis II indicate that individuals who are married to each other have similar likes and dislikes about home furnishings when they first meet or that something happens in the course of their relationship to cause them to compromise their preferences to accommodate differences in spousal preferences. Since there seems to be no plausible reason that similarity of home furnishings preferences may cause individuals to seek each other out, and eventually get married, we suspect that the latter explanation for the similarity may more accurately describe what has occurred.

The results of the testing of Hypothesis III are that no significant differences exist between the accuracy of spousal perception of home furnishings preferences of men and women. This suggests that in cases where joint purchases cannot be made and it is necessary for the couple to count on one of the partner's opinions to make selections, that neither of the spouses generally should be favored over the other to make a satisfactory choice.

What is not completely clear in these results is whether individual choices are made satisfactorily due to sensitivity to spousal likes and dislikes, or whether the person is merely making selections on the basis of his or her own preferences. Since it was discovered in the testing of Hypothesis II that

spouses share preferences in common significantly more than do randomly selected couples, one may in many cases only have to choose something to please oneself in order to satisfy one's partner.

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